

**Testimony of Congressman James P. McGovern
Before the Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest, and Public Lands**

**Legislative Hearing on H.R. 554, the Paleontological Resources
Preservation Act
Tuesday, April 17, 2007 – 10:00am
1334 Longworth House Office Building**

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today on H.R. 554, the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act. Like most people, I have always been fascinated with dinosaurs, natural history, and our planet's history. As both a conservationist and a former Member of the House Resources Committee, I am committed to promoting fossil research and preserving our national heritage for future generations.

In that spirit, my colleagues and I – on both sides of the aisle – introduced legislation again in this Congress to protect the irreplaceable and historically significant resources that are found on public land. Neither the rarity of these fossils nor the growing problem of theft and vandalism of these resources should be underestimated.

Far less than 1% of all organisms that have ever lived become fossils. These rare fossils provide clues that help us solve the mysteries of life on earth. They are one of the few ways we can study evolutionary patterns and environmental change. These fossils are educational and scientific research tools for our generation and those to come. Simply stated, fossils teach us about the history of life on earth, and it is necessary that we have the most complete record possible.

Protecting that fossil record is precisely why this legislation is so urgently needed. As we sit here today, the illegal collection of specimens from federal lands is the most significant threat to vertebrate fossil resources. The commercial value of America's fossils has spawned an exploding international black-market. The sale of fossils has become a highly profitable industry that has led to the theft of fossils from both public and private land.

A 1999 study conducted by the National Park Service opened my eyes to the magnitude of this problem – between 1995 and 1998, it documented 721 incidents of fossil theft and vandalism. A subsequent study commissioned by the Forest Service produced even more shocking results. These are the public's resources on public lands – they belong to all of us, and we must not stand idly by, allowing them to disappear into the hands of unscrupulous dealers and black marketers.

Unfortunately, as illegal fossil collection has flourished, we have failed to develop a clear, consistent, and unified policy that gives federal land managers the authority to properly protect these resources.

H.R. 554 is the product of bipartisan collaborations within both the House and Senate. Throughout this process, we have worked hand-in-hand with our federal agencies, respected members of the professional and amateur paleontologist community, and distinguished research scientists.

Together, we have crafted a bill, which provides stiff penalties for crimes involving the theft and vandalism of Fossils of National Significance (FONS) in order to deter the illegal collection of these resources on public lands. And, it is important to note that the bill seeks only to penalize those who knowingly violate the law and seek to illegally profit from these public resources. It does not place any new restrictions on amateur collectors who by and large respect the value of these fossils. It is limited to public lands, and will in no way affect private land-owners. Furthermore, this bill mandates that all such fossils taken from federal land be curated at museums or suitable depositories. Lastly, it standardizes the permitting practices for excavation on public lands to ensure that fossils are not needlessly damaged.

I am convinced that H.R. 554 represents the best chance we have to guard our shared history and to protect that legacy for future generations.